

'Error coins' look valuable, but are they for real?

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers questions about "error coins," an always popular collectible.

Q—A change-making machine gave me a nickel that's less than half its normal thickness. The design is fuzzy but still legible. What can you tell me about it?—M.M., Chicago

A—You've described one of the most common "fake errors." Acids will reduce the thickness of a coin without totally destroying its design. In fact, some experts have reported seeing paper-thin nickels that still show a visible Thomas Jefferson.

There's a slim chance, of course, that Uncle Sam created your piece on an undersized "blank." If so, the coin's surface texture would be normal although the design would have weak or missing areas. Ask a dealer to check the nickel if you think it may be an authentic error.

Q—We're still looking for one of those 1982 no-mint-mark dimes you described several weeks ago. Have any more of them turned up in circulation? If so, where? And what's the going rate?—J.H., Oak Park

A—People in Arkansas have discovered several in their pocket change, according to news reports. Uncirculated specimens of the rarity—created when mint workers forgot to punch a mint mark into just one of the thousands of dime dies used in 1982—range in value from \$100 to \$225 each, depending on the sharpness of the strike.

Q—Our son received a 1983 quarter with a copper-colored heads side and a normal tails side. The design on the front is clear, although weak around the rim. Does he have a great rarity?—T.R., Orland Park

A—Two catalogues suggest that the coin would retail for \$25, although some dealers say a \$10 to \$15 range is more realistic. One of two clad layers failed to bond to the copper core before the "blank" entered the coin-making machine. The design did not form perfectly because the blank lacked its proper quota of metal.

Q—I own a U.S. cent with just three digits in the date, "197." The fourth digit is not worn; it apparently never was stamped. What happened?—C.B., Glenview.

A—Most likely, part of the heads-side die that created your coin became filled with grease, preventing the last digit from forming on the coin. Experts say such errors are relatively common, worth about \$1 each on the hobby market.

Of course, it's possible a skillful prankster removed the digit. If so, the coin would have no special value.

Questions about coins or currency? Send your queries to Roger Boye, The Arts, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611. Enclose an addressed, stamped envelope if you want a personal reply.